Collaborative and Strategic Coastal Conservation: Lessons Learned

Introduction

Coastal areas are among the most developed in the nation. Conservation planning, from regional to local scales, is urgently needed to protect coastal and marine resources. The combination of intense development pressure and high real estate value in coastal areas necessitates a balance of environmental, economic, and social interests. Planning and prioritizing critical areas for conservation can help achieve that balance by protecting the fabric of coastal communities and the integrity of public trust coastal and marine resources. In response to the U.S. Ocean Commission's call for strong national leadership to support and enhance the critical roles of state, territorial, tribal, and local decision makers in managing and conserving coastal and marine resources, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Coastal Services Center has recently begun work on collaborative strategic coastal conservation projects.

The Center's Maine Coast Protection Initiative (MCPI) serves as a prototype for the type of coastal conservation projects the Center plans to undertake in other regions. The project integrates local conservation issues and activities within a broader regional perspective by developing or enhancing existing partnerships and collaborative activities among conservation groups across Maine's coastal region. Partnerships that focus on managing coastal resources, prioritizing conservation efforts, collaborating planning between organizations, and building capacity for state and local conservation agencies are an essential component of MCPI and the Center's coastal conservation priority.

The lessons learned thus far from MCPI are documented here to provide information and guidance on the adaptation and continued improvement of the Center's coastal conservation initiative. This report focuses on the process of getting the project underway—from bringing partners together, to funding options, to establishing project structure and working styles. Each lesson draws from the MCPI experience of what worked well and what may have been done differently. While each geographic area is unique and subsequent projects will require appropriate adjustments, this paper offers procedural lessons that may be transferred to other regions as projects like MCPI are initiated.

Lessons on Partnering

> ➢ **Provide an appropriate amount of information to bring on interested parties**
> ➢ **Acknowledge work already being done by others to build on and give credit where possible**
> ➢ **Articulate clearly what partners are expected to contribute and to gain from the effort**

Developing strong partnerships is critical to the success of a strategic coastal conservation project. Working to develop the initial project concept is an important first step. Prior to convening a coalition, broadly but clearly define the project's parameters, taking care to balance information needs. Enough information should be provided so potential stakeholders and supporters understand the project, but not moving so far ahead that the decision-making body of the project does not have a role. Each group within the project will need time to digest the information and contribute to the design in order to take ownership of it.

While there are sure to be complementary relationships between coalition members, there also needs to be an awareness of risk of alienation, fear of duplication of efforts, dilution of resources, changing priorities, and usurping of roles among participants. These concerns should be discussed in an upfront, proactive manner preferably with a facilitator knowledgeable on the details of the project. Identifying roles and opportunities within the project and acknowledging and supporting existing work can help ease concerns. Particular effort should also be made to reiterate the value of collaborative projects. The benefits of matching federal resources with local expertise, including increased funding opportunities and capacity building, should be emphasized, as well as what participating groups stand to gain for their efforts.

MCPI application
For MCPI, the original vision was outlined by the four project sponsor organizations. As the project was introduced to broader supporting and advisory groups, there was a need to go back and revisit parameters of the project—sometimes redefining or expanding them to accommodate new input and ensure agreement.

Lessons on Project Planning

> ➢ **Conduct a needs assessment prior to project inception**

A needs assessment ensures that projects are well designed and well positioned to achieve desired outcomes. In order to efficiently allocate limited resources, federal, state, and local government agencies must create and evaluate products and projects according to their impacts on the target audience and ultimately on their impacts to coastal and marine resources. A coastal conservation needs assessment conducted prior to project inception is a form of evaluation prudently administered before expending resources on

project actions. Ample time should be allocated for conducting and analyzing the assessment before starting the project.

The needs assessment should focus on inventory, literature search, and analysis of the study area's conservation and related communities. This will determine the target audiences' interests, needs, wants, learning styles, backgrounds, and ability to participate in programs or utilize project products. Having a needs assessment that captures what has already been done and what needs to be done, can also contribute to alleviating the fear of duplicated efforts.

A formal needs assessment is encouraged as its results can help ground truth the strategies and activities considered as the project develops. It can also help with developing creative solutions to better meet the articulated needs. Whether formal or informal, a needs assessment provides information that can increase the impact of project services and products to the conservation community and the coastal and marine resources they ultimately protect.

MCPI application
For MCPI, the project needs assessment was conducted informally with project sponsor organizations. Whether formal or informal, preliminary needs assessment information should include:
- Identification of stakeholders and appropriate participants.
- Assessment of specific conservation needs and documentation of prior conservation planning efforts in the study area. This may include an evaluation of previous conservation work in the region, a review of existing conservation plans, or documentation of a transferable methodology applied by a principal investigator organization to another region. Further, the assessment should identify perceived gaps in information and conservation planning considerations with an eye to filling those gaps with the proposed project.
- Assessment of the technical capacity and constraints of the target audience. This should include identification of target audience groups particularly interested in or in need of technical skills to accomplish their conservation objectives.
- Documentation of the technical and other (resource, political, etc.) constraints of participants in developing and utilizing a regional strategic coastal conservation plan.
- Recommendations regarding the time frame and resources needed for planning and implementation.

Lessons on Project Organizational Structure

> ➢ **Structure the project to include a core group of primary partners or project sponsors, an advisory body, and a mechanism for broader stakeholder representation and input**
> ➢ **Define a "charge" and specific tasks for groups within the project structure since this will let them know when their work is complete**
> ➢ **Reassess group function and composition at appropriate junctures**

> ➢ **Incorporate appropriate mechanisms and time for information exchange between project groups**

Determining how the project will be managed, how the project team will be structured, and who will make decisions are important considerations. Each project should have a core group of primary partners or project sponsors, an advisory body, and a coalition of broader public representation. Work groups also provide a viable option for getting people with the needed expertise to move ahead on specific issues requiring content knowledge. When getting people involved in any of these groups, ensure they have clear guidance on the group's goal(s) and task(s) so that they will know when their work is done.

As major tasks are completed, it is useful to reevaluate what project groups are needed. Expertise might be needed in one phase and not needed in another. Even the composition and charge of the decision-making body should be reconsidered at critical points, such as when moving from planning to implementation stages. Because clear communication between all project structure levels is vital, a feedback mechanism should be in place to ensure that work group and coalition efforts are reported back to, and decided upon, by the decision-making body.

MCPI application
MCPI used a multi-tiered project management structure that had an executive committee comprised of the project sponsors (role: administration, setting agendas, helping to move project forward), a steering committee (role: decision-making entity, acting like a board for the project), and a coalition (role: forum to bring the coastal conservation community together to develop, discuss, and implement the project). MCPI also formed several work groups consisting of members from the various committees to deal with specific tasks such as developing a project Web site and handling geographic information system (GIS) issues. While using this multi-tiered project management structure, the following observations were made:

- The time needed to effectively "widen the circle" and bring in another tier (i.e., the steering committee) was essentially equal to the time already spent getting the previous tier to come together and function as a group.
- As the project circle was expanded to include each broader tier, the role of the previous tier(s) had to be redefined (redefinition could even include disbanding). For example, once the MCPI steering committee was formed, the executive committee function was simplified to planning project meetings and agendas.
- The size of each committee was important because a balance between adequate representation and manageable group size was necessary.

MCPI partners recognized that there were both benefits and drawbacks to the chosen structure. A benefit was that with each tier communicating and building upon the efforts of the other tiers, there was ample time and opportunity for input and clarification. This allowed for increased involvement and buy-in to both the process and the products. The drawback was that this iterative process took a substantial amount of time. The time

requirements led to people missing meetings and to a greater need for backtracking to update people where previous meetings left off.

There are countless possible project structures. Below are a couple of variations to consider:

- Rather than planning large coalition meetings, consider interviews of wider stakeholder or focus groups. Interview data could be synthesized for the decision-making body's review and comment. Stakeholder groups could also help provide an additional forum for networking and partnership building. If coalition meetings are the structure of choice, efforts should be made to prevent them from becoming too business-like by provide additional activities, such as trainings or field outings.
- The MCPI steering committee was self selected. Alternatively, each of the project sponsors could select steering committee members, perhaps five organization representatives per project sponsor.

Regardless of the project structure organization, it is important that ownership does not lie solely with the primary partners. It is critical for the sustainability of the conservation efforts that all project participants feel ownership.

Lessons on Funding

> ➤ **Secure initial "seed monies" prior to starting a project**
> ➤ **Divide project funding among each of the project sponsors**
> ➤ **Consider funds to offset travel and staff time of the substantially contributing organizations**

Prior to starting a strategic conservation project, initial "seed monies" should be secured to help defray the costs of acquiring meeting space and providing professional facilitation. Funding will also be needed to cover the costs of developing and producing documents to guide project implementation. Using project funding to provide grant opportunities to further project goals can help facilitate momentum to the effort.

MCPI application
With MCPI, one sponsoring organization received the bulk of project funds to provide for substantial staff time to manage the project. Other sponsoring and steering committee organizations contributed significant staff time for project development. An alternative strategy might be that each of the sponsoring organizations receive funds to help cover staff time to execute the project. This may encourage participants to clarify their desired outcome for the project and help define and sharpen project boundaries for the decision-making body. Future MCPI-type projects may consider allocating funds so that single partners out of a multiple-partner proposal do not receive more than 50 percent of the total funds. Steering committee and other contributing organizations could also be given a stipend to defray the travel and staff time necessary to substantially contribute to the work of the project.

Lessons on Outreach, Communication, and Feedback

> ➢ **Ensure project partners feel comfortable and have open communication with one another from the outset**
> ➢ **Initiate external communication to gain public support**
> ➢ **Foster strong local advocacy to help motivate others**

Open internal communications as well as communication to stakeholders and audiences outside of the core project team should be a component of every project. Effective internal communication eliminates time-consuming misunderstandings and repetition. Outwardly focused communication is necessary to gain the public support that can ultimately garner financial support for coastal conservation at state, regional, and national levels. Having actively engaged local advocates for these types of projects is essential. Communications and outreach to potential advocates and the public should include education detailing threats to local resources (for example) as well as information on how the project is addressing those threats. Before crafting a message, make sure to identify the audience. It is important to know what issues the audience may be interested in and how best to present the information. Outreach and communication is equally important in project planning as it is in implementation.

MCPI application
The MCPI project team found the following outreach efforts useful:
- Using appropriate local and regional conferences to get the word out about the project. Even in the conceptualization phase, project sponsors co-presenting on their efforts (at a conference session) helped to promote cohesion and clarity of message, raised project awareness, provided a mechanism for broad feedback and input, and garnered advocates at a variety of levels.
- Production of one-page project handouts to provide a succinct and consistent project summary to interested parties. The consistency of messages provided by handouts can avoid confusion and editorializing. A handout also allows an individual to take the message back to their organization for consideration. In the handout, include contacts of the project sponsor organizations who are available and willing to answer inquiries and speak in more detail about the project.
- Development of a project Web site to serve as a dynamic and accessible venue for project information. A Web site can articulate current project status and may be used for one audience during project planning and then expanded to a larger audience for project implementation. If maintained and updated, a Web site can become a valuable and timely information resource for describing project results and providing access to project documents, meeting announcements, and other information.

Lessons on Working Styles and Meeting Cultures

This final section of lessons learned is more general in nature. While each of these was an important part of the MCPI project, the following can and should be applied to any variety of partner-oriented projects.

> ➤ **Allot sufficient time for meetings**
> ➤ **Make facilitation a priority**
> ➤ **Establish clear and fair roles**
> ➤ **Agree upon and use consistent terminology**
> ➤ **Make project documentation thorough, consistent, and easily accessible**

Bringing multiple and diverse groups together is necessary for any collaborative project but can lead to a host of challenges. Each group is sure to be accustomed to different working styles and meeting cultures. An awareness of these differences and an initial effort to set a style appropriate for the project will help things run smoothly. The following are some things to consider when tackling this issue:

Meeting time**:** Time will be needed to sufficiently discuss topics at various stages of the project. During the development of the project, two- or three-day workshops with project partners may be needed to allow for fully articulating the project goals and desired outcomes. Using the momentum of a multi-day workshop will be more efficient than attempting these tasks over several different meetings where time is needed to get everyone back on track and up to speed. The MCPI group found this phase to be the most time intensive and often struggled with time limitations of multiple meetings.

After the initial planning phase of the project is complete and committees are meeting regularly, attendance can be unpredictable. Committee members may or may not be present, or they may send a representative. As a result, each meeting can feel like a new group is getting together. It is important to bear this in mind and develop agendas accordingly. It is also vital to set aside ample time for breaks. Participants need time to process information, recharge, and network with each other.

Facilitation**:** The right facilitator can make or break the project. Facilitators are essential to the group process, so it is important to find one that can accommodate discussion and build consensus while moving the process forward at an acceptable pace. Prior to meetings, the facilitator should work with the project group responsible for meeting planning to ensure that agenda topics are on target, time allocations are appropriate, and clear, consistent terminology is in place. At the beginning of each meeting, the facilitator should clearly present the desired outcome of the meeting and explain the process for how the discussion and input will be incorporated. It is also the facilitator's role to be able to identify when the discussion gets off topic and to "park" issues to be addressed at another time. It may be important to use a local, well-respected facilitator. Ideally, the facilitator should be well versed in the project content. If necessary, try different facilitators to find the right one for your group.

Roles**:** The group should take time at the beginning of the project to establish guiding rules on representation at meetings, communications and information sharing, document reviews, and other protocol. Additionally, it is important to assign someone the role of ensuring that the procedures are executed. The roles and expectations of the group's decision- making body also need to be well defined. These roles should be determined at

the beginning of the project and revisited throughout its duration. It is also important to keep in mind differing participants' roles within their own organization, as group members may or may not have the authority to commit their agency's resources. Finally, to foster more active participation and ownership of meeting content and success, consider rotating the role of meeting host among the project member agencies.

Terminology: Diverse groups bring diverse terminology. Many terms mean one thing to one group but something else to another. It is critical to establish consistent terminology to be used during the project. Even seemingly simple terms like goals, objectives, and capacity building can cause confusion if subtle differences in meaning are not defined and agreed upon up front. Once established, project definitions should be documented and provided at every meeting. While building consensus on project terminology may seem tedious initially, the time and frustration this can save is considerable.

Documentation: From project beginning to end, documentation is essential. The initial proposal should be as comprehensive as possible, including details on outside activities that are going to support the project, as well as a plan for evaluating success. During the lifetime of the project, significant time may pass between meetings. For this reason, it is critical to consistently record detailed meeting notes to help remind the group what it accomplished and what needs to be done. All project documentation, including meeting notes and products, should be stored in a central location for easy access by all participants. Web or File Transfer Protocol (FTP) sites are possible choices that provide the option for password protection for sensitive or limited distribution documents.

Conclusion

Forming collaborative partnerships, while often challenging, is critical for strategic conservation planning. Partnerships bring more people to the table and present better opportunities to leverage resources and build on existing work. Moreover, multi-partner projects such as MCPI create opportunities for regional thinking and foster ecosystem approaches to management. The benefits of collaborative efforts make it worth investing the time and effort to develop them properly. The lessons learned through MCPI provide insights into creating partnerships for conservation planning in other regions.

Suggested Resources

For reference materials on building teams, see *Team Launch! Strategies for New Team Start-Ups: Team Leader's Manual* by Ingrid Bens, Participative Dynamics.

For reference materials on conducting needs assessments, visit the "Needs Assessment Training" module on-line at *www.csc.noaa.gov/needs/*.